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ABSTRACT

A master's degree program for teachers of English as a Second Language is described, focusing on a method of student evaluation that emphasizes learner autonomy and seeks to extend that principle to trainees' classroom practice. The approach is based on the concepts that involvement in learning, including assessment, is vital to effective learning and that the teacher is the key person to help students develop this learner autonomy. In the teacher training program described, the assessment scheme offers each course member a genuine opportunity to collaborate with their trainers in assessment of assignments. This is accomplished by using explicit criteria against which the trainee can evaluate his work, with negotiation of grade if the trainee's and trainer's assessments do not agree. This method balances the empowerment of the individual student to take a meaningful part in his own assessment with the need for the institution to retain responsibility for maintaining appropriate professional and academic standards. Comparison of trainer and trainee assessment grades suggest that there is generally agreement,and interviews with students provide some evidence of a change in trainee attitude towards assessment and learner autonomy. (MSE)

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COLLABORATION IN ASSESSMENT: EMPOWERING THE INDIVIDUAL COURSE MEMBER

Leslie Dickinson

Abstract

The key to coping with change in education is learner autonomy, empowering the learner (in collaboration with the teacher) to adjust learning objectives, materials and techniques to suit changed circumstances. This paper describes an ongoing experiment at Moray House which seeks to give teachers and trainers on a post-experience Master's course experience of learner autonomy in the crucial realm of assessment, in the belief that this will help participants to develop a sympathetic attitude towards learner autonomy in their students.

The students on the MA in TESOL at Moray House are invited to take part in a collaborative assessment scheme in which they have a genuine opportunity to contribute to the evaluation of their own work. At the same time the scheme ensures that the institution retains responsibility for maintaining appropriate standards and quality.

Preliminary results suggest that there is broad agreement between the student being assessed and the tutor, and interviews with students provide some evidence of a change in attitude towards assessment and learner autonomy.

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Introduction

The argument in this paper is reasonably simple; it is as follows:

- An important aim of language teacher education is to produce more effective language learning among pupils;

- a key factor in learning effectiveness is having an active and independent involvement in learning; in other words, having a measure of learning autonomy. This is especially important in a fast changing world.

- The key person in helping pupils to develop a measure of learning autonomy is the teacher.

- However, developing autonomy is a fairly new idea and may be in conflict with the educational tradition. Consequently, some teachers and teacher trainees may not be in sympathy with the idea of autonomy in learning.

- One factor in persuading teachers and trainee teachers to change their views is an experience of autonomy; this has the additional advantage of increasing their own learning autonomy.

- This is done in the MA TESOL course at Moray House partly through an assessment scheme which offers each course member a genuine opportunity to collaborate with tutors in the assessment of his or her own assignments.

- Data from monitoring the scheme confirm previous findings from research in self assessment, that there can be a reasonable level of accord between course member grades and tutor grades; and that the match between course member grades and tutor grades gets closer as course members gain experience of collaborative assessment.

I will develop each of these arguments in the paper, though the main emphasis will be on describing the collaborative assessment scheme and discussing the data from it.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

There is growing evidence that success in language learning, (and in other subjects) is related to the learner having an active, independent involvement with language learning. I shall call this ***learning*** **autonomy.** Autonomous learners are not necessarily, or even characteristically isolated or independent learners; they may well be found in conventional classrooms, but they can be distinguished from teacher dependent learners in terms of several characteristics. Autonomous learners are able to do the following things:

- identify what is being taught. That is, they are aware of the teacher's objectives;

- state and follow-up their own purposes in addition to the teacher's. That is, they are able to formulate their own learning objectives;

- select and implement appropriate learning strategies;

- monitor their own learning;

- monitor and evaluate their own use of learning strategies;

The claim of the importance of learning autonomy can be supported both from research work in education, including language learning, and through reasoned argument. Wang and Peverly (1986) review findings of strategy research (in subjects other than language learning) and conclude

> "...one feature is salient across the research from the various perspectives. Effective learners are characterised in the research literature as being cognitively and affectively active in the learning process. They are seen as being capable of learning independently and deliberately through identification, formulation and restructuring of goals; use of strategy planning; development and execution of plans; and engagement of self-monitoring. (p.383)

Similar findings have been suggested for language learning. The early research on language learning strategies carried out by such researchers as Rubin (1975), Stern (1975), and Naiman Frölich Stern and Todesco, (1978) indicated that good learners have an active involvement with language learning, that they have clear ideas about the best ways for them to go about language learning, and that they set up their own

learning objectives in addition to the teacher's objectives. Groups like the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL)[1] at the Université de Nancy II in France, and individuals like Ellis and Sinclair (1989), and Dickinson (1987) see language learning best facilitated by the development of greater independence on the part of the learner involving the learner in accepting a greater share of responsibility for his own learning.

It is also possible to make an *a priori* argument in support of autonomy. Bruner (1966) states the argument very well

> Instruction is a temporary state that has as its objective to make the learner or problem solver self-sufficient...otherwise the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent upon the perpetual presence of the teacher.

Bruner is saying that the outcome of instruction must, logically, be to make the learner self-sufficient or *autonomous*, since the alternative is the production of a learner who can *only* learn with the help of a teacher.

Furthermore, modern society requires that the educated individual is able to adjust and change, and to continue learning in order to cope with the changing circumstances in a fast changing world, reflected in the theme of this seminar. Thus, among the implications which Lange (1989) draws from his consideration of 'six very broad characteristics of the future "technological society"' are:

> 3. Lifelong learning must be a construct in every teacher development programme.
>
> 4. Experimentation, risk taking, autonomy, and flexibility must be key elements in the development of a model of schooling that places responsibility for learning on students, giving them freedom to try, test, innovate and create.

Twenty years before this, Carl Rogers (1969) argued that learning to be independent as a learner through learning *how* to learn is essential in a fast changing world.

> The only man who is educated is the man who has learned *how* to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of *seeking* knowledge gives a basis for security. (104)

I have argued that learning autonomy is an important outcome of education, is related to learning success, and that it is necessary in a fast changing world. I will now show that it is possible to give teachers and teacher trainees an experience of autonomy through involving them in self-assessment (which is in essence what collaborative assessment is about).

WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT?

The collaborative assessment scheme at Moray House has been used with various courses since 1985, and currently operates in the MA TESOL course for English language teacher trainers and language teachers. The central feature of the scheme is the possibility for course members to collaborate with tutors in the assessment of their own assignment work.

The theory behind collaborative assessment is that motivating course members to make self assessments of their own assignments increases their autonomy. However, it is crucially important that this experience of self assessment is taken seriously by both the course member and the tutor. If it is seen merely as a simulation in which the course member's assessment of grade is ignored in the decision on the grade for the assignment, then course members are unlikely to take collaborative assessment seriously. The course member's grade has to be taken seriously, and the course member must feel that the grade he awards himself can make a difference in the decision on the final grade. On the other hand, the institution - represented in this instance by the course tutors - has the vital responsibility for maintaining the standards of the degree. If the course member's grade was accepted automatically then the grading system would quickly become meaningless, and the degree would rightly be seen as worthless. These two apparently conflicting positions can be resolved through the collaborative assessment scheme implemented in Moray House.

In the scheme, each assignment is assessed using explicit criteria (provided by the tutors, but negotiated with the course members). At the point of handing in an assignment, the course member has the option of assessing her own assignment against the criteria and awarding herself a grade according to the marking scheme used in the course. This grade is recorded on the Collaborative Assessment Grade Sheet and submitted to the relevant tutor in a sealed envelope along with the assignment. The tutor then assesses the assignment and awards it a grade according to the criteria.[2] The tutor then, and only then, checks the Collaborative Assessment Grade. If the two grades are the same, then the agreed grade is entered in the record. If the two grades are different - either because the tutor gave a higher grade

than the course member, or because he gave a lower grade than the course member, then the tutor asks the course member to come and negotiate an agreed grade. However, the negotiation must be on the basis of the criteria. If the tutor and course member cannot agree, then there is provision for a third party to be involved, but that is rarely necessary.

In this way, the scheme balances the empowerment of the individual course member to take a meaningful part in his or her own assessment, with the need for the institution to retain responsibility for maintaining standards appropriate to the level of masters degree.

The scheme gives course members the opportunity to develop their autonomy through practising the evaluation of their own work and it gives them an experience of a measure of autonomy through this involvement in self assessment. It raises awareness of several problems and issues in assessment which are important for teachers and teacher trainers to consider. Examples of such issues are the balance between formative and summative functions of assessment; the power which assessment usually bestows upon the teacher/tutor; the relative merits of criterion referenced and norm referenced assessment, and the arbitrary nature of many decisions in assessment. In addition, it has the potential to increase the quality of the course members' work. This occurs through the process of making serious self assessments which requires more thorough familiarity with the assessment criteria because of the need to understand them thoroughly and examine them carefully in order to apply them in collaborative assessment. If course members are involved in negotiation with the tutor over a grade, this also requires close familiarity with the criteria.

HOW DOES COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT RELATE TO AUTONOMY?

The essential characteristic of learning autonomy is that the learner makes (some of) the decisions about his or her own learning. That is, the learner retains a proportion of the responsibility for his own learning. So far as the MA TESOL course members are concerned, a crucial indicator of developing autonomy is the acceptance of responsibility for determining whether, and to what degree, a written assignment meets the standards of a Master's level course. The MA TESOL course attempts to provide a progression from the first Term, where course participants are given considerable counselling support, where criteria are carefully explained and where the first assignment - though graded for feedback purposes - is regarded as a practice assignment to help course participants to discover standards of the course,

to the fourth Term, involving the writing and presentation of the dissertation (9 - 10 months after the beginning of the course). At this stage, the course participants are much more autonomous.

Thus, the course participant's decision about whether his assignment work meets appropriate standards develops over the year, up to and including the dissertation, when most course participants are able and prepared to attest to the quality of their own work *vis a vis* the standards of the course. This progression may continue into professional life after the conclusion of the courses where the emergent professional undertakes the presentation of papers at conferences and for publication; here the decision on the standard of the paper is (initially, anyway) for the writer to make. An essential difference between the expert and the novice lies in just this ability to make confident self-assessments. Experts can more confidently self-assess; novices are still learning to do so. But novices do not turn into experts at the touch of a magician's wand; they develop over time through the process of learning.

The ability to assess oneself is a necessary outcome of *any* successful academic learning endeavour. It consists of

> Knowledge of the standards used by the academic community to judge performance at the appropriate level;
>
> the ability to compare one's own performance against those standards and place the performance on some scale. (e.g. That the performance is GOOD, AVERAGE, POOR, NOT ACCEPTABLE.)
>
> The internalisation of the standards and the ability to judge future performance oneself against the internalised standards.

I believe that all successful learning relates to self assessment in a similar way. If one considers language learning, for example, a language element or unit can only be said to be learned when its performance by the learner is accepted by speakers of that language. However, the learner himself must achieve the ability to make some approximate self-assessment of the acceptability of his performance; otherwise he will be constantly uncertain of the acceptability of his performance and constantly teacher (or other informant) dependent.

Collaborative assessment of written assignments in the MA TESOL Course involves similar stages. It involves learning about the appropriate level of performance, judged against some set of standards acceptable to the academic community. These standards are expressed - for a particular assignment topic -in

terms of the criteria supplied by the tutor, and learning to self-assess involves first understanding, and then applying these criteria. A second stage is the establishment of generalised personal criteria based in part on the tutor's criteria, which can be used for any academic endeavour. It is perhaps at this stage, for some people, that the novice begins to turn into an expert.

WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE THAT COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT WORKS?

In order to be convinced that Collaborative Assessment works, one would want positive answers to a series of questions. Perhaps the key question to be answered is *whether course members (CM'S) seriously attempt to assess themselves by applying the criteria in assessment, or do they merely try to bargain in order to get the best grade they can?* This question can be answered in part by comparing the tutor's grade with the course member's grade. If there is a reasonable correlation between the grades awarded by tutors with those awarded by the course members, then this would be some evidence that course members are seriously attempting to assess themselves.

The data in Table 1 shows the correlation between Tutor's grades and course members' grades for one group of MA students over the year. The correlation between the tutor's grades and the course members' for the first assignment is very low, (0.11; $p = 0.57$) indicating no relationship. However, the level of correlation over the next two assignments increases, though it does not reach statistical significance.[3] (For assignment 3 it was 0.33; $p = 0.15$; and for assignment 4 it was 0.52; $p = .009$).

TABLE 1.

DATA FOR COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT
1990-91

n = 29

1 SEX	2 T:1	3 C:1	4 T:3	5 CA:3	6 T:4	7 CA:4
1	4	4	4	4	4	4
2	2	4	•	•	3	4
1	5	4	4	4	5	5
1	3	3	3	4	4	4
1	3	4	3	3	4	4
1	2	5	•	•	4	4
1	3	3	•	•	3	4
2	4	3	4	3	•	•
2	1	4	2	3	3	4
1	4	4	3	4	5	4
1	5	4	4	3	4	4
2	4	4	4	4	4	4
1	4	2	4	3	3	3
2	3	4	3	4	4	4
2	4	3	•	•	•	•
2	4	4	•	•	•	•
2	1	3	•	•	•	•
1	4	5	4	4	4	5
2	3	4	•	•	4	5
2	4	4	•	•	4	4
1	5	4	4	4	5	5
1	5	5	4	5	5	5
1	5	5	5	5	5	5
2	4	5	3	4	4	4
2	4	3	4	3	4	3
2	•	•	3	3	•	•
2	5	3	5	5	4	5
2	4	3	5	3	5	4

Notes:

Labels: T:1 = Tutor grade for Assignment 1; CA:1 = Course member grade for assignment 1.

Sex: 1=Male; 2=Female.

Grades: Assignments are graded A-E. Numerical values have been assigned as follows A=5; B=4; C=3; D=2; E=1

CORRELATIONS:

Correlation of T:1 and CA:1 = 0.1138, n=28, p=0.571
Correlation of T:3 and CA:3 = 0.3253, n=21, p=0.147
Correlation of T:4 and CA:4 = 0.5181, n=24, p=0.009

One interpretation of the data - the one I prefer for obvious reasons - is that course members are seriously attempting to assess themselves against the criteria, and that they get better at it over the period of the course. We would expect this pattern; when course members begin the course, they have to discover the expectations of the tutors and the standards they are expected to achieve. The increasing correlations proceeding from the very low correlations of the first assignment to the much higher are for the third assignment may indicate that this learning process is going on.

However, there are additional favourable indications that course members seriously attempt to assess themselves. We[4] collected the views of a group of students[5] on several aspects of assessment including the purposes of assessment and the authority of the tutor in assessment. They were asked to complete a questionnaire right at the beginning of their courses, and before they had taken part in collaborative assessment.

We reasoned as follows: one view of the motivation of course members for taking part in Collaborative Assessment was that many do so in order to bargain for a better grade, without reference to what they thought they deserved. If it was the case that most students regarded the purpose of assessment as summative - that is more concerned with certification than with learning, then this would be evidence in support of the **bargaining** view. They would be less likely to make a sincere attempt to assess themselves against the criteria. We also reasoned that the course members' beliefs about the authority of tutors' decisions in assessment were crucial. If most students believed that tutors' interpretation of criteria, and their application

of them should be regarded as absolute, then it was less likely to be the case that participants in collaborative assessment were sincerely attempting to assess themselves. There would be little point since the tutors' decisions were irrefutable, and the only point would be to bargain for a better grade.

The purpose of assessment

The question of whether assessment is regarded by course members as a device for comparing students and testing their knowledge, or whether it is also perceived mainly as helping in learning was answered by all 34 course members. Just under half (47%) regarded "helping students to learn " as the most important reason for having assignments, and 29% placed it second in importance. None of those questioned regarded "comparing students" as an important reason for having assignments. 20.6% thought that the main reason for assignments was to test how much the students knew, and 26.5% regarded it as the second most important reason. Thus, there is no support here for the view that the main purpose of assessment is summative. The majority of these course members regarded the main purpose of assessment as formative, and therefore they are more likely to sincerely attempt to assess their own grade.

The authority of the tutor in assessment.

We asked the course members about their view of the authority of the tutor at Moray House, and - since all the respondents to this questionnaire are teachers by profession - their view as teachers about their own authority over their pupils. We asked first about students in general; *Did participants believe that students know what mark they deserve for a piece of work?* 23.5% believed that students always know, 64.7% believed that students sometimes know, and 8.8% believed that students usually did not know what mark they deserved for a piece of work. We then asked about the respondents themselves; *did the individual know what mark he or she deserved?* As one would expect, the results were similar; 26.5% claimed to know always, 52.9% reported that they sometimes knew whilst 8.8% usually did not know.

When we asked *whether it was desirable for students to have this ability*, 63.3% agreed that it was, while 30% had reservations and 6.7% believed that it was undesirable.

The participants were then asked *whether tutors ought to help students to develop ability in self-assessment*. 66.7% agreed that tutors should help students in this, whilst 21% thought that this was a possibility. 6.5% thought that it was a low priority (to be done only if there was time) and 6.5% believed that tutors should not help students to learn to self-assess.

Taking these results together as an indicator of attitude towards the authority of the tutor in assessment, then about two thirds of the respondents thought that it was desirable for students to have the ability to estimate their marks, and a similar proportion saw it as an aspect of the tutor's job to help students to develop this ability. A high proportion of the respondents (88%) indicated a belief that students have opinions about how well they have performed in a particular assignment, and just under 80% reported that they themselves have reasonably reliable opinions about how well they have performed.

If we can take these views as typical of course members taking the MA TESOL course (which is a big assumption), then taken as a whole, the results indicate that the majority of course members are likely to enter into collaborative assessment with the intention of genuinely attempting to estimate their own grades on the basis of the criteria, and that over the year they get better at doing so.

Whatever the interpretation of this data, which anyway can only be illustrative, we believe that collaborative assessment is a valuable aspect of the MA TESOL course. It encourages course members to reassess their views about the purposes of assessment, and to re-consider their opinions on the respective roles of course members and tutors in assessment. My main theme was, of course, that collaborative assessment is an experience of autonomy, and that this experience of autonomy will help course members to develop a positive attitude towards learning autonomy in their own students, which is an important requirement for success in language learning, particularly in a fast changing world.

NOTES.

1. See, in particular Riley, P. (1985)

2. We have a careful system of double marking to ensure equitable standards among tutors. However, this is not relevant in this paper.

3. The correlations have been calculated for letter grades on a five point scale A - E; Tutor's grade and student's grade are regarded as the same only when there is an exact match e.g. both giving a 'C' grade. One alternative which is sometimes used in Collaborative assessment (See Boud 1987) is to accept grades as "the same" when they differ by up to 10%. We did not collect data which would allow us to use the alternative.

4. The research being reported was carried out by Gillies Haughton and myself.

5. The data for collaborative assessment of this group of students was not available when I wrote this paper.

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